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AIRBORNE OPERATIONS IN SICILY, JULY 1943

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**AIRBORNE OPERATIONS IN SICILY**  
**JULY 1943**

**INTRODUCTION**

Axis resistance in North Africa crumbled in May of 1943 with the onslaught of the American forces, following their landings in November 1942 at Casablanca, Oran and Algiers, and with the steady, unrelenting drive of the British Eighth Army from the El Alamein Line starting in August 1942. (1) These forces, after meeting in Tunisia in April 1943, made their final drive against a determined enemy, which culminated in the successful conclusion of the Tunisian Campaign on 12 May 1943. (2) (See Map A)

Five months prior to victory in Tunisia the next military objective had been selected. In January 1943 President Franklin D. Roosevelt and Prime Minister Winston Churchill met with their staffs at Anfa, a suburb of Casablanca, to discuss the future conduct of the war. During this conference the decision was made to invade the island of Sicily as soon as possible after the successful conclusion of the African Campaign. (3) The objectives of the Sicilian Campaign were: To clear the lines of communication in the Mediterranean; to divert German strength from the Russian front; and to increase pressure on Italy. (4)

**THE GENERAL SITUATION**

*Reference Map B*

The invasion objective presented an area of about 10,000 square miles of rugged terrain, separated from the toe of Italy by the narrow straits of Messina and extended to within ninety miles of Cap Ben Peninsula, Tunisia. The terrain was mostly mountainous except for the Catanian Plain in the southeastern section of the island. Excellent assault landing areas were to be found along the entire four hundred

(1) A-13, p. 10; A-2, p. 87; (2) A-10, p. 24; (3) A-5, p. A-2; A-1, p. 2; (4) A-1, p. 2.

and eighty-five miles of coastline. (5) Mount Etna, the highest peak of the island, lying just north of Catania, rose to a height of 10,740 feet from a base occupying approximately four hundred square miles. A mountain range extended along the northern coast with ridges protruding toward the coast and southward, becoming flat as they approached the coastal area. Numerous small rivers creased the rugged terrain. These were mainly mountain streams, which became dry during the summer months. Roads were good but frequently too narrow to accommodate anything but one-way military traffic. The road and railroad beds, being cut through predominantly mountainous terrain, could be easily and quickly blocked.

Hostile forces in Sicily included five Coastal Divisions totaling about 61,300 men; four Field Divisions with a combined strength of 58,500; Army Ground troops totaling 57,000, and 31,700 miscellaneous troops. This made an aggregate of 208,500 enemy troops based on the assumption that units were up to strength. (6) Two German Divisions were also represented; elements of the Herman Goering Division, and the 15th Panzer Division, which was separated into three teams of regimental combat team size. (7) (See Map B)

The mission of the Field Divisions was to support the beach defense, as a secondary defense, and to resist the invader's attack by counter-attack. These Divisions were widely dispersed but their mobility was such that a concentrated effort could be applied within a few hours after alert. The Coastal Divisions, although primarily characterized by static defensive installations, were not regarded as entirely immobile. Seven mobile groups, which were a part of the Coastal Divisions, had been identified on the island. These groups were equipped with transportation and highly mobile assault weapons. In the event a Coastal Division unit

(5) A-5, p. C-29; A-2, p. 92; (6) A-5, p. C-15; (7) A-5, pp. C-15, 16; A-3; A-2, p. 92

was unable to repel invasion it was their mission to hold the invading force until the mobile group was organized and ready for the counter-attack. (8)

Enemy air strength for the Mediterranean area was estimated to be about five hundred eighty-two (582) serviceable planes, including German and Italian fighters, bombers and fighter-bombers. It is of interest to note, that in arriving at this estimated figure, the obsolete Italian aircraft were rated as approximately fifty percent effective as their German equivalent. Thus, an original estimate of seven hundred aircraft was reconciliated to the final estimated figure of five hundred eighty-two. (9)

#### GENERAL PLANS

On 12 February 1943 the first planning instructions were published by the planning headquarters set up in Algiers under the direction of General Sir Harold Alexander. (10) The first Operation Instruction, dated 19 May 1943, indicated that the operation, designated as "HUSKY", would be under the supreme command of the Allied Commander-in-Chief, General Dwight Eisenhower. The Combined Naval Forces would be under command of Admiral of The Fleet Cunningham, the American and British Air Forces under Air Chief Marshal Tedder and the Combined Allied Ground Forces commanded by General Alexander, the Deputy Commander-in-Chief, Allied Forces. (11) The Combined Allied Ground Forces, later known as 15th Army Group, was made up of the U.S. Seventh Army under the command of Lt. General George Patton and the British Eighth Army commanded by General Montgomery. Units included in the U.S. Seventh Army were: The 1st Division, 2nd Armored Division, 3rd Division, 9th Division, 45th Division, 82nd Airborne Division, and the 1st, 3rd and 4th Ranger

(8) A-5, p. C-15; (9) A-1, p. 8; A-5, pp. C-24, 25; (10) A-5, p. D-1; p. A-2; (11) A-5, pp. D-2, 8; D-4, 6, 7; D-1; A-2.

Battalions. The British Eighth Army consisted of the Canadian 1st Division, the British 5th, 50th 51st, 56th and 78th Divisions, British 7th Armored Division and the British 1st Airborne Division. (12)

The general plan indicated simultaneous landings by units of the U.S. Seventh Army along the coast from Licata to Scoglitti and British Eighth Army landings on the southeastern coast generally from Pozzallo to Siracusa. (13) (See Map B-1) Complete air coverage over the landing areas, from fighter bases on Malta and Pantelleria and bomber bases in Tunisia, was the responsibility of the Allied Air Forces. Artillery support for the assault landings and initial ground operations was the responsibility of the combined British and American Naval Units.

#### THE AIRBORNE SITUATION

The airborne elements destined to take part in "OPERATION HUSKY" were the U.S. 82nd Airborne Division and the British 1st Airborne Division. Of these two Divisions only the British had previously "hit the silk" in battle. One of its units had made a successful night jump on a radiolocation station at Bruneval, near Le Havre, France in 1942. (14) Other elements of the Division had been used in the fighting in Africa. (15) The Division as a whole had not been committed. In each instance separate parachute brigades or companies were used. The American 82nd Airborne Division was as yet untried in battle.

About the middle of May 1943, shortly after their arrival in Africa, the 82nd Division was given the mission of preceding the amphibious landing of the 1st Division, on Sicily, and establishing an airborne bridgehead for that unit. The 1st Division was to land between Gela and Scoglitti at 0255 hours 10 July 1943. Intelligence information indicated the presence of elements of a German Panzer Division in the area of

(12) A-5, p. D-1; D-3, 6, 7; (13) A-1, p. 6, 7; A-5, p. A-6; (14) A-17, pp. 50-52; (15) A-18, pp. 9, 10.



Caltagirone, about 15 miles inland from this coastal area. (See Map B)

In order to preclude an attack on the amphibious landings it would be necessary to drop airborne elements in the area during the night of 9 July 1943 to seize and hold the road net and surrounding terrain between Caltagirone and the sea. This mission was given by the Division to the 505 Combat Team Reinforced, consisting of the 505 Parachute Regiment; 3rd Battalion, 504 Parachute Infantry Regiment; 456 Parachute Field Artillery Battalion; Company "B", 307 Parachute Engineer Battalion, and attached Medical and Signal elements. The remainder of the Division was ordered to concentrate rapidly in Sicily by D plus 7 in the 45th Division or 3rd Division areas, as directed. The 2nd Battalion, 509th Parachute Infantry Regiment, (which had recently been redesignated from the 503rd Parachute Battalion) was to remain in North Africa in reserve, available for drop missions as directed. (16) British Airborne missions were, in general, the seizure of important bridges and surrounding strongpoints in advance of the British 5th and 50th Divisions in their drive north along the eastern coast of Sicily from the Avola - Siracusa area, where they were to make their amphibious landings. (17) (See Map B-1)

#### OPERATION PREPARATIONS

The 82nd Airborne Division, under the command of Major General Matthew Ridgway, immediately prepared a training program for the purpose of preparing the command for the assigned task.

The parachute elements of the Division were initially bivouacked at Les Angades Airfield, Oujda, Morocco, while the glider elements were encamped at Marnia, about twelve miles towards the Mediterranean from Oujda. A rigorous physical training program was established for all personnel in addition to intensified training in the firing of all weapons including Light Machine guns, 60mm and 81mm Mortars. Street fighting,

(16) A-5, p. D-7; A-16, p. 5; (17) A-2, pp. 94, 97, 99.

commando tactics, bayonet training and grenade practice were required training for all. (18) Small unit tactics were then reviewed placing considerable emphasis on setting up defensive positions at night. The Fifth Army Airborne Training Center was established at Los Angeles Airfield for the training of new jumpers, development of Airborne Standing Operating procedures and the Operation of a test section. (19) Air transport was supplied by the 52nd Troop Carrier Wing, recently arrived from the United States. The pilots were qualified for daylight operations over familiar terrain and were experienced in dropping chutists and flying in formation but were lacking experience in night flying over unfamiliar territory. They immediately began their night training in preparation for the night drop to be undertaken by the 505. They progressed rapidly in these simple training flights and were soon flying formation without the use of regular navigational lights. (20)

Standard plane loading was developed for all equipment and personnel. The Combat Teams then began training as units. The training area was of excellent size and possessed some varied terrain. The temperature, at times soaring to 120 degrees, presented the greatest training difficulty. Jumps were made in this area, with full combat loads, emphasizing assembly and tactics of defense. Two large daylight drops were made but further training of this nature was cancelled. In the latter part of June a Combat Team dry run was executed using a model of the objective in Sicily. (21) In this exercise only the jumpmasters jumped, working from "jump patterns" already on the ground. (22) During the evening of 9/10 June, one month prior to the operation, the 505 Combat Team Commander, Col. James Gavin, with two Battalion Commanders and three Commanders from the 52nd Troop Carrier Wing, flew over the objective areas

(18) A-6, p. 4; A-15, p. 3, prld to cmbt; (19) A-6, Incl. #4; (20) A-6, p. 4, Incl. #3; A-15, p. 5, prld to cmbt; (21) A-3, p. 5; (22) A-16, pp. 27, 28.

using the same route they would use one month later. The checkpoints on the terrain showed up clearly in the moonlight and, although some flak was encountered, the reconnaissance concluded without mishap. (23)

After slightly more than a month of desert training the Division was in excellent physical condition, well qualified in the handling of all combat weapons and had successfully participated in the training problems requiring combined ground operations. (24)

On 16 June 1943 the 82nd Airborne Division began the administrative move to the bivouac area in Kairouan, Tunisia, in preparation for the coming operation. At this time the Battalion Combat Team exercises were getting their initial trials, as were the small group glider training exercises in Marnia. These exercises were called to a halt as all available aircraft were being used in the shuttle move of the Division to the Kairouan area, a distance of about one thousand miles. The Combat Team dress rehearsal jumps for the 505 and 504 Combat Teams, using drop zones closely simulating the actual combat drop zones, were likewise cancelled. Parachutists, who were in training at the Fifth Army Airborne Training Center, were hurriedly qualified and returned to the Division for duty. While the airlift was in operation, shipment of personnel and equipment was also being made by rail. Organic transportation made the trip by motor movement. (25)

The entire 52nd Troop Carrier Wing was used in the night and day shuttle, from 20 June to 4 July 1943, thus losing at least two weeks of valuable training time which was supposed to have been devoted to DZ locator training and use of radar control devices. (26) It is important to note here, that no unified command existed for the Air Force and Airborne elements during or after this period of training. Cooperation, between the Wing and Airborne Division, was excellent but cooperation

(23) A-3, p. 5; (24) A-6, p. 4; (25) A-6, p. 5; (26) A-6, p.5, Incl. #3, A-15, pp. 5, 6, prld to cmbt.

*why.*

alone was insufficient for the close team-work needed between the two elements in their preparation and execution of the combat operation. It is of further interest to note, that air photos were seldom used as training aids in the spotting of DZ's by the pilots of the 52nd Troop Carrier Wing. (27)

The elements of the British 1st Airborne Division had also performed the same type of training as the American 82nd Airborne Division. They possessed one advantage having previously met the test of battle and were intensely aware of the fact that toughness and physical fitness were just as important as mental alertness. (28)

#### KAIROUAN. THE DEPARTURE AREA

As the 82nd arrived in the Kairouan area, the Division scattered the Battalion Combat Teams in an effort to place the troops near their proposed take-off airfields. Ten departure fields were to be used by the 82nd Airborne Division. (29) "Situation Tents", where detailed plans of the operation were worked over sand table terrain devices and maps, sprouted immediately throughout the 30 mile arc around Kairouan. (30)

The 505 Combat Team Reinforced spent their last week pouring over plans of the operation using the photos, maps and sand-tables to assure thorough orientation down to the last man in the last squad. Equipment was cleaned and checked and by D minus 2 the equipment bundles had been prepared and were ready to be loaded on the planes, already dispersed according to the parking plan, at the departure air fields. (31) The 504 Combat Team, consisting of the 504 Parachute Infantry, less the 3rd Battalion, the 376 Parachute Field Artillery Battalion, Company "C", 307th Parachute Engineer Battalion, attached Medical personnel, and the 325 Combat Team, made up of the 325 Glider Infantry Regiment, 319th Glider Field Artillery Battalion,

(27) A-6, p. 4; (28) A-17, pp. 50-52; A-18, pp. 9, 10; (29) A-16, p. 3; A-6, p. 6; (30) A-15, p. 7, prld to cmbt; (31) A-6, p. 8.

Company "A", 307th Engineers, and attached Medical personnel, as yet had no definite mission. They, consequently, occupied themselves preparing plans "A", "B", "C", etc., in an attempt to anticipate any situation that could arise. (32)

The bright, clear morning of D minus 1 saw the troopers of the 505 Combat Team arriving at the airfields with equipment bundles and individual parachutes. Planes were spotted, and plane-loads were led to their individual aircraft. The planes were then prepared for flight by loading the para-racks with equipment bundles, checking release mechanisms, stowing individual chutes, checking anchor cables, door masking, and testing the light panels at the jumpers' door. Returning to camp for lunch, the troopers bathed and made last minute adjustments to individual equipment. After an early evening meal the men returned to their aircraft with ample time for complete checking of equipment by jumpmasters prior to the final loading. One-half hour before take-off time the 3,405 combat-loaded warriors, staggering under the weight and bulk of their equipment, entered the aircraft, 227 C-47's and anxiously awaited their introduction to battle. (33) Their attack plan, as rendered in 505 Combat Team Field Order Number 1, dated 28 June 1943, is stated in substance as follows: "2nd Battalion, 505, "D" Battery, 456 Field Artillery plus Service Detachment will drop on DZ "S" at H minus 2 hours 39 minutes. (See Map C) Organize and defend area as shown. Outpost Hills, C, D, E, and F. Patrol northwest to Margola River and secure identifications. Block roads as indicated. Contact 1st Battalion, 505 and 3rd Battalion, 504. Prepare counterattack plans. Headquarters Company, 505 (-), Service Company, 505 (-), 456 Parachute Field Artillery (-), Company "B", 307th Engineers (-), and 307th Medical Detachment will drop on DZ "S" at H minus 2 hours 49 minutes. 456 Field Artillery be prepared to mass fire (32), (33) A-6, p. 6, incl. #3.

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landing of 1st Division. Run wire to Command Post of the 16th Combat Team. Coordinate with the Commanding Officer. Contact 1st Battalion, 505. 3rd Battalion, 504, Demolition Section, 3rd Battalion, 504 Service Detachment, 504, will drop on DZ "Q" at H minus 3 hours 15 minutes. Block roads as indicated and prepare bridge for demolition. Delay enemy forces moving south until daylight. Defend until relieved. Maintain contact with 505th Infantry. Continue mission until capture of Miscomi by Combat Team 16 at which time you are attached to Combat Team 16." (34) (See Map C). There was the plan! Characteristically ambitious and thorough. Every Trooper knew his job and knew it well. The plan was sound and workable.

The Troop Carrier Plan was to fly an overwater course, determined in conjunction with the Navy, east to the island of Malta, then north to Sicily and west along the coast of Sicily to a checkpoint, formed by Lake Rivierre and the Acate River, where the formations were to turn inland and reach individual drop zones by following final checkpoints selected from air photos. (35) (See Map 1)

Let us recall now that in this same general area of Kairouan were elements of the British 1st Airborne Division. (36) They, too, were making ready for their operation, which would be carried out concurrently with the American Airborne Operation. The British had prepared for three airborne operations to be directed against Sicily; one glider operation for the night of 9/10 July; and two parachute operations, one on the night of 10/11 July, and the other on the night of 13/14 July. (37) On the night of 9 July 1943 a British Airlanding Brigade (equivalent to U.S. Glider Infantry Regiment) was to be transported by air and dropped on the east coast of Sicily, in the vicinity of Siracusa. The plan was to drop west of Siracusa, between 2210 and 2230 hours, to capture the bridge, Ponte Grande, over the Anapo River. They were also to capture the coastal (34) A-14; (35) A-6, p. 8; (36) A-2, p. 90; (37) A-4, p. 56.

batteries north of the river and the seaplane base in this area. (38)

The trip was to be made by ten Horsa gliders and 127 Wacos. The powerless ships to be towed by 137 aircraft, C-47 type, of the 51st Troop Carrier Wing, a sister unit to the 52nd Wing which was transporting the 82nd Airborne. The gliders were to be released in the vicinity of the objective while still 3000 yards at sea off the coast of Sicily. The Wacos approaching at an altitude of 1900 feet and the Horsas at 400 feet. The Waco landing zones were west of Penisola Della Maddalena, while the Horsas were to land in a field near the Ponte Grande Bridge south of Siracusa. The route of flight was over the southeast corner of Malta to Cap Passero, along the coast of Sicily, 3000 yards over the sea to the landing zones. (39)

We can best appreciate the difficulties encountered in this operation by following the airlift and subsequent drops of both the American and British airborne units simultaneously, inasmuch as the take-off, rendezvous, and flight of the aircraft, totalling 364 planes and 137 gliders, originated from the same general area of Kairouan, Tunisia. (40)

#### THE ASSAULT

9 July 1943 was hot and clear, with high winds developing in the afternoon, typical weather for this time of year in North Africa. The planes of the 82nd cleared their fields between 2010 and 2116 hours. At the same time the British Glider units were being towed into the air for their rendezvous. All aircraft took off and assembled at the air rendezvous points without mishap except for three planes of the British formation which were unable to get into the air. (41) The formations began their flight to Sicily as darkness descended, about 2130 hours. Flight was at low level for tactical reasons. The wind was still strong and flying was rough causing airsickness among the men. The first hint of

(38) A-2, p. 94; (39) A-4, pp. 57, 58; (40) A-6, pp. 9, 10; (41) A-4, pp. 58, 59; A-6, pp. 6, 9; A-15, p.1, Sicily.



difficulties became apparent when many planes missed the first important checkpoint, the island of Malta. Obviously no corrections had been made to compensate for the weather conditions being encountered, consequently many formations began drifting from their courses. (42) A number of the pilots became separated from their formations and went on alone, others followed the formations of the British units to the Cap Passero area. (See Map D) Some flak and tracer fire was encountered as formations neared the coast of Sicily, and this probably was instrumental in keeping elements of the British formations farther out to sea than the 3000 yard limit which had been designated. The towed cargos of British Airborne fighters approached their supposed landing zone areas shortly after 2300 hours. They were cut from their mother ships in the thirty mile per hour wind which was still whipping the coastal waters below them. Because many of these planes had guided their flights too far out to sea and had not made allowances for the high wind, their gliders, after being released, were unable to remain in flight long enough to reach the coast and were consequently landed in the choppy Mediterranean. It was estimated that of the 134 gliders that made the trip, twelve landed on the correct landing zone, seventy-five were strewn over the southeastern part of the island and forty-seven floundered in the sea. (43) A total of eight officers and sixty-five men reached the Ponte Grande Bridge during the night of 9/10 July and held it until 1530 hours 10 July, when overwhelming enemy strength wrested that important objective from their weakening grasp. The timely arrival of the 17th Infantry Brigade rectified this serious situation. They recaptured the bridge, advanced across it, and the airborne group again took over its defense. The glider loads which had landed at the wrong landing zones went into action regardless of how far from the area of their assigned mission they had been dropped. They

(42) A-6, p. 9; (43) A-4, pp. 58, 59.

attacked any hostile elements they encountered, caused confusion throughout their areas, and substantially aided in the disorganization of the beach defenses. (44) All tow aircraft of this element returned safely to their bases in North Africa.

As the flight serials of the 82nd Airborne Division approached the coastal areas of Sicily, they too, were subjected to flak and tracer fire. Many pilots, in trying to evade the concentrations of flak, broke loose from the formations and became scattered over the southeastern section of the island. According to statements made by some of the men, a number of these planes had their men standing and hooked up ready to jump for 30 to 50 minutes while the pilots searched for the drop zones. (45) In approaching their likely drop zones, the planes climbed to an altitude of 600 feet and tried to get into a proper jump attitude for the exit of their troops. Most groups dropped between 2400 and 0030 hours. Parachutes blossomed along the southern coast of Sicily from Gela, near the objective, to Noto and Avolo in the British sector. (46) (See Map F) The delay in the time of the jump was an additional reason for the extreme difficulties encountered in assembling. The moon had already set and the assembly efforts had to be made in total darkness. (47) Many men, upon landing, found themselves alone in an area or with three or four others. These small groups immediately set about the task of gathering more of the airborne men and began their "guerrilla" like actions against the enemy.

The 1st Battalion serial, which was to have been dropped just northwest of the crossroads above Gela, (See Map F) were scattered thoroughly over the island. One group of about 320 were dropped three miles northwest of Avola on the east coast. They organized into small groups and encountered the enemy in small skirmishes. The group assembled at daylight, attacked Avola, and made contact with the British, in whose sector (44) A-4, pp. 58, 59; (45) A-16, p. 6; (46) A-6, p. 9; (47) A-6, pp. 8, 9.

they had dropped. Another group of the same serial landed in a well fortified area two miles northeast of their assigned drop zone. They were effective in holding the enemy from the beaches, removing road blocks, and stopping hostile armored movement. The Battalion Commander was killed when the group was attacked by a German tank column. Another plane of this serial unloaded its combat cargo near Marina Di Ragusa, about half way between Vittoria and Noto. (See Map F) This group participated in the capture of Ragusa. (48)

*not shown*  
The 2nd Battalion <sup>*should be shown on map*</sup> serial landed south of Ragusa, about 25 miles from their assigned drop zone, and were attacked before landing. A large part of the group assembled before noon of the 10th and attacked enemy positions near S. Croce-Camerina. They took forty-five prisoners, then went on to capture the town itself, capturing 144 more prisoners. They met and overcame the enemy again east of the town, then bivouacked for the night. The following day they moved west and joined the Combat Team Headquarters on the 12th July. (49) (See Map F)

*not shown*  
A group of about forty men, from the Headquarters, 505 serial, occupied the high ground covering the road net leading inland from the 45th Division beaches on 10 July. They were credited with facilitating the landing of the 45th Division. (50) Their action demonstrated the initiative and aggressiveness which characterized the discipline and esprit de corps of the Combat Team as a whole. An enemy armored vehicle was destroyed as it approached the beach, several pillboxes were rendered ineffective and five officers and ninety-six men were captured by the group.

The demolition group, which was to have dropped near the railroad bridge three miles east of Gela, was dropped sixty-five miles away, just south of Siracusa, in the British sector, <sup>*not shown*</sup> on the east coast. (See Map F)

(48) A-6, pp. 10, 11; (49) A-15, "Sicily" p. 3; A-16, p. 11; (50) A-16, p. 11.

The majority of the serial of the 3rd Battalion, 504th Parachute Infantry Regiment, dropped into an enemy assembly area north of Nisemi. (See Map F) Many of the troopers dropping in this area were captured, including the Battalion Commander.

Elements of the 3rd Battalion, 505, dropped near Vittoria and assembled west of the town blocking the highway approach. On D plus 1 the group was attacked by German Panzer elements. Despite serious losses they held the high ground. Later, under the direction of Col. Gavin, the Combat Team Commander, a vigorous counterattack was launched with the aid of Sherman Tanks, enabling the troopers to recover their dead and wounded. They held this critical terrain without further contest. (51)

"I" Company, 505 Parachute Infantry, less one plane, dropped on its assigned drop zone. This group accomplished its assigned mission, knocked out a blockhouse and several pillboxes and captured numerous enemy. (52)

Throughout this initial period of the operation, isolated groups ambushed German patrols, cut telegraph wires, knocked out tanks, repelled counterattacks, talked the enemy into surrender, and fought him into submission. (53)

Assembly of the Combat Team continued and on 13 July 1943 its strength was reported as 1648. At this time numbers of airborne troops were also being reported present by the other organizations in the area which the airborne personnel had joined upon being separated from their own units in the jump. (54)

It is readily apparent that fully organized combat was impossible due to the wide area over which the forces were scattered. Nevertheless, the confusion and alarm created in the ranks of the hostile forces, as parachutists and glider-borne troops descended upon them over such a wide area, is readily understood. This, linked with the fact that the forces

(51) A-6, pp. 10, 11; A-15, "Sicily", pp. 3, 4; A-16, p. 12; (52) A-16, p. 9; (53) A-16, pp. 9-12; (54) A-16, p. 13;.

dropped were exceptionally aggressive in hunting out the enemy and disposing of him in almost all situations, and that their true number was unknown to the enemy, substantially assisted in the overwhelming success of the amphibious landings. Further proof of the success of the operation is projected in a statement made during the Nuremberg trials, by General Kurt Student, an authority on airborne operations in the German Army: "The Allied Airborne Operation in Sicily was decisive despite widely scattered drops, which must be expected in a night landing. It is my opinion that if it had not been for the Allied Airborne forces blocking the Herman Goering Armored Division from reaching the beachhead, that Division would have driven the initial seaborne forces back into the sea. I attribute the entire success of the Allied Sicilian Operation to the delaying of German Reserves until sufficient forces had been landed by sea to resist the counterattacks by our defending forces." (55)

It will be recalled that further airborne activity was to be directed on the objective. A British parachute operation had been planned for the night of 10-11 July. The mission was to capture a bridge three miles west of Augusta, and to organize and defend the high ground west of the town. Because of the speed of advance of the British 5th Division in this area, the operation was unnecessary and was cancelled. (56)

#### THE 504TH COMBAT TEAM OPERATION

Throughout D Day (10 July 1943) the alerted 504th Combat Team waited at departure airfields, in the Kairouan area, for the message which would send them on their way to join the "new veterans" of the 505. The negative message from the Division Commander had been delayed, and at 1840 that evening the Combat Team was released for a second day of waiting, because by that time it was felt that it was too late to initiate the move. (57)

(55) A-15, "Sicily", p. 1; (56) A-4, p. 57; (57) A-16, p. 7.

At 1830 hours the following day, 11 July, orders were sent from the Division Command party, aboard the MONROVIA, directing the Combat Team to drop on the DZ nearest Gela. (58) (See Map F) Seventh Army, whose Command Party was also aboard the MONROVIA, was immediately requested to notify all friendly troops of the airborne operation. (59) At 0845 hours a message was dispatched by Seventh Army to all Commanders in the area, indicating the character of the flight, the altitude, and the approximate time and place the parachutists would drop. (60) It is of interest to note that as early as 6 July, at a meeting held on the MONROVIA, General Patton had expressed great concern over the problem of notifying friendly troops of the route of flight of the second airborne lift. The Seventh Army Commander further stated that he had been trying to get this information from the Air Corps since 3 July. (61)

The route of flight for the 144 planes, carrying the 504 Combat Team, was the same as for the 505. (See Map D) The absence of the high winds of the previous operation, and the fact that the drop zone was behind our 1st Division lines instead of behind the enemy lines, gave rise to hopes for a pleasant trip. (62) Despite the calm air and the light of a quarter moon, some formations missed the first important checkpoint of Malta, and other planes lost their leaders. (63) The lead planes of the flight approached the coast of Sicily about 2230 hours, then turned northwest along the coast heading for the checkpoint, Lake Bivierre, near Gela. (64) (See Map F) As the lead plane reached Lake Bivierre a burst of machine gun fire came from the beach below. It was as though the burst was a signal for everything below to open fire on the elements of the flight all along the coast. Anti-aircraft fire from the Allied ships and from batteries on the beaches tore into the slow moving transports full of human cargo. (65) Many of the planes crashed downward in a vivid arc

(58), (59), A-16, pp. 11, 13; (60) A-5, p. D-6; (61) A-20, p. 1; (62), (64), (65), A-16, p. 7; (63) A-6, p. 11; A-16, p. 7.

of flame, while others tried, hopelessly, to swing clear of the hail of fire. (66) Planes forced down along the coast were fired on by the shore guns as the troopers tried to launch the rubber life rafts from the riddled hulls of the fallen aircraft. (67) Of 23 planes shot down, only 6 crashed carrying their cargo of troopers with them. However, jumping from a burning, crashing craft was, in many instances, like jumping from the frying pan into the fire. (68) In these instances numerous troopers were, during their parachute descent, fired on and killed by American troops on the beaches. Many of the airborne soldiers landing in the 45th Division area were engaged in fire fights with guards of the 45th Division, who were not familiar with the paratroop uniform and who had previously been warned of the possibility of encountering German parachutists. One trooper was killed by a guard of the 180th Infantry because he didn't know the right password. (69) It was later learned that word of the airborne operation was delivered to the 45th Division but had not been received by the 180th Infantry. (70) It is rather ironic to note that the 1st Division, in whose area the parachute drop was to have been made, identified the beleaguered troopers as a German Parachute Regiment in its G-2 report. (71)

of the 144 planes which made the flight, twenty-three were shot down, eight returned with full loads, among which were four dead and six wounded chutists. One plane, carrying Brigadier General Charles L. Keeran, Jr., Assistant Division Commander as an observer, failed to return. (72)

The 504 Combat Team, following the pattern of the 505, scattered its silk over the island of Sicily from the area of Gela, near the scheduled drop zone, to the area of Pozzallo, about sixty miles southeast. (73) (See Map F)

(66) A-16, pp. 7, 8; (67) A-6, p. 11; (68) A-16, p. 8; (69, 70) A-16, p. 8; (71) A-6, p. 12; (72) A-16, p. 8; (73) A-15, "Sicily", p. 5; A-16, p. 8.

Thus ended the second day! An operation, which should have been little more than an administrative move, became a bloody, costly battle between elements of the same army, for lack of a little information at the right time.

#### BRITISH OPERATION 13-14 JULY 1943

The objective of the British airborne operation of 13/14 July, was to seize and hold the only bridge over the Simeto River, about five miles south of Catania. (74) (See Map B-1) One Parachute Brigade (less one-half battalion), with glider-borne anti-tank guns and engineer and medical units, was to execute this operation. The plan was to drop one parachute company at 2200 hours close to the bridge, to attain maximum surprise, in an effort to overrun the position before the defending troops could destroy the crossing. This company was to remove the charges before the arrival of the main body of chutists, at 2240 and 2328 hours, who were to defend the area. At 2353 gliders were to come in with the heavier weapons for anti-tank defense.

The force, of 107 planes and seventy-two aircraft with gliders, departed the Kairouan area and headed for the Sicilian East Coast. The approach up the East Coast of the island was made about ten miles out to sea, due to the shipping traffic and anti-aircraft zones, which extended 11,000 yards out from the beaches. The approach to the drop zones again was faulty. Fifty-six planes dropped their cargo on or near the correct drop zones, twenty-four loads were scattered considerable distances from their target, and twenty-seven aircraft returned to Africa without having dropped their men. Of the gliders, twelve made successful landings, one landed in the sea off the coast, three were damaged on take-off and one tow plane was reported missing. (75)

(74) A-2, p. 99; (75) A-4, p. 60.



About 200 chutists made the assault on the bridge. They captured it and removed the charges. Five anti-tank guns came in, by glider, for anti-tank defense. During the day of the 14th, the strength of the forces defending the bridge grew, as those who had been dropped some distance from the objective began to straggle back to the target area. Enemy resistance continued steadily and after darkness had fallen, the troopers were ordered to withdraw to the high ground to the south. The bridge, still intact, was retaken the following morning by the British XIII Corps.

(76)

Although the mission had been accomplished, the plague of the airborne, that of failing to hit the designated drop zone, was once more forcefully demonstrated.

Following the debacle of the 504th Combat Team on D plus 2 in Sicily, all further movements by air were cancelled. (77) Consequently, the glider-lift planned for the 325th Combat Team and Division Headquarters of the 82nd Airborne Division was not performed.

On 16 July 1943, the remaining elements of the Division departed North Africa by plane, with fighter escort, and arrived at Ponte Olive Airdrome, near Gela, at 1515 hours on that date.

By 18 July the Division had completed its assembly and reorganization with a strength of 4,309, and prepared to continue the attack. When the Sicilian Campaign concluded on 16 August 1943, the airborne was on its way back to the training area in Africa, ready to try it again!

#### ANALYSIS AND CRITICISM

In analyzing the airborne operations in Sicily, we can readily see that a unified command over the airborne element and the air transportation element was sorely needed. The two elements must work together as a perfect team. Had the enemy on Sicily been more powerful and aggressive, the

(76) A-2, p. 100; A-4, p. 60; (77) A-16, p. 9.

scattered airborne elements would probably have been captured or annihilated during the first day of combat.

The airborne soldier must be dropped in concentrations, in the zone which he has studied, to gain the full effect of the rehearsals of his plan of attack, which should be an integral part of the prior planning and training for an airborne assault.

The personnel of the air arm should be thoroughly trained for their specific task of dropping parachutists at the right time and the right place. Their navigation can not afford to go awry as it did in this operation.

The shuttle movement of personnel by air was, indeed, a priceless opportunity to enact a dress rehearsal of the complete operation. Many problems, such as drop zone location by the air corps, night assembly, effectiveness of individual combat loads, and the experience of flying a large tactical formation, could have been discovered in a mass jump of this nature.

There is little doubt that the formations would have reached their proper drop zones at the proper time, had some type of radar directional control been dropped with pathfinder personnel, shortly before the scheduled drop of the Combat Teams.

The planned drop time for the elements participating in the D minus 1 lift, left very little time for assembly before moonset. Consequently, with the delay caused by faulty navigation, many of the troops jumped in total darkness, which added immeasurably to the difficulties of night assembly.

The delivery of combat troops into battle by parachute or glider takes maximum advantage of the element of surprise. To commit airborne troops in a drop behind their own lines, such as the 504 Combat Team drop, is unwise and unsound. The airborne's main principles of surprise and shock action are lost to the commander who so employs these troops of

opportunity.

Analysis of the disastrous results of the drop of the 504 Combat Team, leads the writer to these conclusions: Communication to friendly forces, informing them of an impending airborne operation in or over their zone of action, must be timely. Communications must be thoroughly adequate, and above all, when received by subordinate commanders, it must be disseminated to the entire command with all possible haste and thoroughness, regardless of the existing situation. Secondly, when anticipating flight and descent over friendly troops, the decision to use airborne forces must be made sufficiently in advance to insure enough time for dissemination of the information to all friendly forces.

In the British Operation of D minus 1, the failure of many of the gliders to sustain flight to the coastline for a distance of 3000 yards, shows clearly that both the pilot of the tow plane and the pilot of the glider must be thoroughly familiar with the capabilities and limitations of the powerless aircraft. It is obvious that no cognizance was taken of the strong off-shore wind, which these gliders encountered. The release of gliders at a comparatively great distance from the target would, undoubtedly, make the utmost use of the silent, speedy approach of the craft, and would enhance the ability to make surprise attacks on hostile installations. However, making such a release over water, where the estimate of distance is difficult, is not wise and, most assuredly, does not contribute to the morale of troops.

All troops of an Army team should be familiar with the appearance, at least, of all members of the team. The distinctive battle dress of the airborne soldier was an item in which he took great pride. It was a definite morale factor and played an important part in creating and maintaining the toughness and aggressiveness which characterized the men of the airborne. It must have been a disgusting surprise to the men of

the 504 Combat Team to have men of the same Army firing at them because of their inability to recognize the uniform.

In conclusion, it may be said that the efforts of the Allied Airborne were not in vain. Many lessons were learned in the operation and new policies were adopted to preclude a recurrence of the sally to Sicily.

Despite the wide dispersion suffered by the troops of the 505 Combat Team and the British Airlanding and Parachute Brigades, they contributed much to the success of the amphibious landings and subsequent campaign. Unfortunately, the drop of the 504 Combat Team on Sicily, contributed nothing but confusion and costly lessons on how not to use an airborne unit.

#### LESSONS

1. Complete and willing cooperation between air and airborne forces must be maintained during the training and operational phases of a combat mission.
2. A unified command and joint air and airborne staff must exist during the planning, training, and operational phases to insure success of a combat mission.
3. Airborne troops should be <sup>dropped</sup> employed only when maximum effect of their surprise and shock action can be attained.
4. Pathfinder groups, transported by highly trained air force personnel, should precede the main airborne force and guide them to the proper drop zone by the use of directional control apparatus.
5. The decision to use airborne forces must be made in sufficient time to disseminate pertinent information to troops concerned.
6. Aircraft flight plans must be simple. Over-water corridors should be cleared of vessels for the specific time of flight, except for guide ships to act as checkpoints for change of direction, when necessary.

7. Airborne troops, to be decisively effective, must be employed  
in mass.

8. Full scale, realistic rehearsals, over terrain closely re-  
sembling the target, must be a part of the air and airborne training  
phase of every operation.